NATO, Russia and European security after the cold war

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Summary
Only in response to political, resp. moral, pressure, NATO has eventually decided to open its ranks to new applicants for membership. For the East Central European countries, joining the Atlantic alliance is crucial for a number of historical and geopolitical reasons. It is only on the basis of NATO membership that they feel stabilisation of their region to be possible. Long-term fear of Russia plays but a secondary role. Traditional fear of German power continues to be latent, but as long as the Germans operate within an Atlantic framework, such concern is efficiently overcome. A system of collective security – which is sometimes seen as a possible or even as a desirable alternative to the alliance model represented by NATO – is structurally capable of providing but a mere semblance of European security.

The Background of NATO Enlargement

In the controversies about NATO enlargement, one fundamental fact is frequently ignored: that the problem was put on the political agenda not because of NATO's expansionist ambitions but as a result of urgent requests from countries wanting to join the alliance. For a long while, NATO responded reluctantly and even defensively – not the least because any enlargement of alliance territory is bound to entail an enlargement of alliance commitments. In the perspective shared by most allies, an optimum number of members is already there; an addition of new members appears to add greater inflexibility. Therefore, many feel that enlargement is unlikely to create more security. Despite of all this, NATO came under ever more intensive political and moral pressure: There were countries believing they belonged to the West and aspiring to be with the West which felt not welcomed but rebuffed – something which NATO was hardly able to justify in the long run. The driving force behind the development towards enlargement of alliance territory was therefore not NATO, but the membership applicants insisting that NATO opened the door for them. Accordingly, it seems appropriate to speak not of enlarging but opening NATO.

Why are the countries of Eastern and Central Europe so much interested in joining NATO? There are first of all two reasons. One of them is the fact that NATO is the only functioning security system in Europe today. In this day and age with prevailing uncertainties and instabilities, such an alliance represents a stability factor of high value indeed. The other reason lies in East Central Europe's geopolitical condition and historic experience. Before World War I, the region did not exist in terms of statehood, since it was divided between three empires: Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Only the demise of these three empires after their defeat in 1918 gave rise to Central and East European countries as states of their own. However, when two decades later two of the former great powers in the form of Nazi-Germany and Soviet Union became strong again and concluded a pact with each other, the Central and East Europeans lost their independence once again. At first, the region was divided between the two empires, then conquered in total by Hitler's armies only to be taken over not long afterwards by Stalin's troops and to be added to the "internal", respective "external", parts of the Soviet empire. And there they stayed for the next four and a half decades. Only after the collapse of the Moscow empire were these countries between the Baltic Sea and the Balkan peninsula given back their independence. And this independence, so their strongly manifested will, should never again be taken away from them.

It would be a mistake to believe that these countries' only or primary motive is their fear of Russia. It is true that the most recent and longest experience of suppression was made with the Russian side in the form of the now dissolved Soviet Union. And it appears as if a large part of the Russian elite today wants to restore in one way or another the former USSR. But the Central and East Europeans' feeling of not being safe enough in the long term, is related to many other aspects as for instance internal, intraregional and economic conditions. In other words: it is related to the state of general stability of East Central Europe. The peoples in the region hope to strengthen this stability decisively by finding support in the West. The problem has crucial aspects which are of an internal nature.

Germany and Russia in East Central European Perception

But even to the extent that external factors are under consideration, Russia is not the only matter of concern. Essentially, Germany is viewed as a possible danger as well. The fact that the East Central Europeans currently tend not to be much focussed on the German challenge, results from German NATO membership which makes Germany a country securely integrated into the West and thus incapable of imperialistic ambitions. Thus Germany's weight which has increased through reunification, appears not as a possible threat but as a source of reliable assistance. It is not only economic help and technical know-how that the East Central Europeans are seeking. More than anything else, Germany is seen to be necessary as a bridge, rather than as a barrier (as it was in previous times), to the West. In contrast to the interwar period, East Central Europe now possesses a landlink to the West on the basis of Germany's belonging to both NATO and the EU. This is one of the crucial benefits that the East Central Europeans want to secure for the future. Their own adherence to NATO, is one of their means to this end.

The new situation has been deliberately created. The democratic forces that, in the late 1980s, initiated political transformation in East Central Europe sought, inter alia, German reunification in order to eliminate the GDR as a barrier which prevented adjacency with the West. For this reason, both the Solidarnoœæ opposition in Poland and the reform group at the helm the Hungarian CP supported the Federal Republic in matters of the German problem. This policy has been successful: The GDR which had been a continuous obstacle to contact with the West has been removed; there is a united Germany which is firmly anchored in the West and is a stable link to NATO. As Germany does provide rather than prohibit access to the West, the East Central European countries are not threatened any longer by geopolitical isolation – a crucial factor of their disaster in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In East Central European opinion, the current favourable geopolitical situation has to be made use of so as to ensure Western support on a long-term basis. It is membership in NATO which is seen to be crucially important as the principal, permanent, and solid link that will guarantee security for the future.

This longing for security is fuelled by a number of factors and developments outside the region. There are statements from "national-patriotic" circles in Moscow that express revisionist tendencies and proclaim a need for another imperial expansion and domination. There are attempts by Russian politicians to reconquer lost positions and regain the influence they believe adequate for a great

power by making use of economic or other pressures or even military force. In particular, the war in Chechnya gave rise to grave concerns in both East Central Europe and beyond. An increasing need is felt to prevent future "Russian uncertainties" by an association with the West as close as possible. Ukraine which had originally opted for neutrality is by now interested in co-operation with NATO in the closest possible way as long as membership is out of the question. Even in such a traditionally Russophile country as Bulgaria there are considerations on closer links to the Atlantic alliance.

Reasons for Western Willingness to Accept New Members

Why has NATO eventually responded positively to the demands of the applicant countries? On the one hand, there is the above mentioned feeling one should not to rebuff sympathising countries or else turn them into adversaries. Countries that are willing to follow Western standards of democracy, rule of law, market economy and human rights should be protected against risks of internal or external instability. At the same time, admission into an international association where the members mutually agree to respect these principles and simultaneously renounce revisionist claims, is seen as an important stabilising factor for both the transforming countries and Europe as a whole.

Also, Western governments know from their own historic experience the positive effects of integrating states which have to cope with internal and/or external challenges. The model is provided by the history of the Federal Republic of Germany. After World War II, the country was faced with much greater challenges than had been the Reich after 1918. But, in contrast to the Weimar Republic of the late 1920s and early 1930s, it was able to follow the path of democracy and stability. The difference explaining why the latter had failed and the Federal Republic managed to succeed, was that in 1945 the victorious powers had learned their lesson from previous disaster. They did not isolate the Germans again but integrated them into the Western community of states. The opportunity of integration offered to West Germans after the war should now also be open to East Central Europeans.

The Russian Problem

In Western capitals, it is emphasised that Russia must not be alienated by the process of opening NATO. While this country with its vast Eurasian territories greatly transcends the Atlantic framework underlying NATO, a rift between the two sides should be avoided. That is, while there is no question to invite Russia into NATO (whose large range of obligations Moscow is definitely unwilling to shoulder), security interests shared by either side can, and shall, form a basis for a permanent relationship of mutual advantage. This is the central Western idea behind the Russia-NATO Founding Act. In addition, Russia is accorded guarantees to the effect that NATO is no anti-Russian bloc. By allowing Russians far-reaching participation in NATO matters, the Western allies hope to initiate a co-operative relationship. To be sure, no one can reasonably expect NATO to give an obligatory say to Moscow in NATO decisions. This would entail according a right of membership without corresponding obligations to be taken. The existing arrangement implies that NATO has already paid a high price – in the eyes of some critics even too high a price. Now, Russia can voice its opinion on every question, one of the consequences being that decision making processes within NATO will be made more difficult and slowed down by additional consultations.

Underlying is the Western hope that good will and active effort will eventually pay, if perhaps only in the longer run. On the Russian side, the Founding Act is often seen in a quite a different light: as a means to prevent as much evil from NATO as possible. Underlying is the feeling that one needs to protect oneself from the Atlantic challenge and to rein in Western "expansion" to the East. Since, in this view, the evil of both NATO enlargement and, even less, NATO existence cannot be prevented, all effort will have to be concentrated on hindering Atlantic activities as much as possible. Far from appreciating NATO as a security partner, the proponents of this school of thought see it as a security

opponent that has to be impaired to the maximum extent possible. Thus there is a clear danger that the West's effort to reach conciliation with Moscow, will not to be honoured and, in addition to that, even be exploited against NATO.

If this standpoint should prevail in Moscow, this would make negative impact not only on Western-Russian relations. It will also be harmful to Russia domestically. The NATO members' willingness to have the country integrated into an all-European consensus and framework, is in many respects crucial for its development. Not only does Russia depend on Western cooperation with regard to a great number of economic, technological, and ecological problems. It also needs a quiet and safe political neighbourhood so as to be able to concentrate on changing and rebuilding the very domestic structures necessary for future development. If Moscow would choose to ignore this need for the sake of dreaming back into past grandeur and seeking its restoration, such policy direction could not but entail most harmful consequences. Such a course of action would also amount to repetition of past failure, i.e. to the very phenomenon which Karl Marx denounced as a mere farce. After all, both the Czars' Empire and the Soviet Union perished when, for the sake of external ambition and/or antagonistic relations with the outside, they took burdens which were beyond internal, particularly economic, capacity. Given Russia's greatly diminished potential in the 1990s, the costs of power politics vis-a-vis the outside world would inevitably produce disaster within a very short period of time. A modes glimpse of what would have to be expected in this event, has already been provided by the Chechnya debacle.

The Proposal of Collective Security in Europe

The end of East-West confrontation has given rise to the idea that NATO which was founded to counter the erstwhile Soviet threat, might be discontinued after this mission has become outdated. As a more timely substitute to NATO, a system of collective security has been advocated. However, NATO's sixteen nations have decided to stay together. What they deem necessary is to adapt the alliance to new conditions. The East Central European applicants for membership concur with this view: Their hopes for security in Europe rest with NATO. Such wide-spread acceptance of the Western alliance is not by coincidence. What the well-meaning proponents of the collective security idea fail to recognize, is that its implementation would practically result in collective insecurity for Europe. All systems which have been devised to create collective security, have not fulfilled the promise.

A case in point is the League of Nations after World War I which was incapable to prevent, let alone counter, military aggression. This became clear even before Hitler's "big aggression" started. In the mid-1930s, the League of Nations supported by Britain, France, the USSR, and other powers was willing but unable to stop a minor country, fascist Italy, from conquering and colonizing Abessinia even though the aggressor was totally dependent on oil shipment from abroad which might have been cut easily with no use of force. But decision-making under a system of collective security is such that even a "cheap" decision of this kind was impossible in the defense of peace. Abessinia provided a test case to Hitler which crucially shaped his assessment of his opponents: They were but paper tigers who could be expected to have no teeth when open conflict would break out. Accordingly, international reliance on a system of collective security was essential for World War II to break out. It would be an incredible failure both of practical common sense and intellectual capacity to neglect this lesson of history and to repeat a previous error for which European countries, not in the least Russia, have paid an enormous price.

The details of why a system of collective security is in fact a system of collective insecurity, can be easily explained. The rationale the advocates count on, is the mutual pledge taken by an unlimited number of participants that they will be willing to support any one among them who might become the target of aggression. In theory, this is marvellous: Any possible aggressor is promised that he will have all the other members of the system against him. Therefore, he appears to be in a state of

hopeless inferiority from the very beginning. In practice, however, things are quite different. First of all, the very fact that a system of collective security indiscriminately depends on any country of a given geographical area eliminates the basis for common action at the very moment when security is crucially at stake. For if there is no common focus on security, no such security can be expected to result. Since every country will assess the challenge to security by standards of its own and act on that basis. It would be tantamount to an outright miracle if lack of commonality would somehow transform into common action under conditions of duress and danger. Miracles rarely happen in international politics.

This may seem to suggest the conclusion that countries which, when the chips are down, prove unwilling to support the victim of aggression, have to be seen as reneging their promise under the system of collective security. But this would be misleading. Actually no country which avoids to support a victim of aggression, or else even joins the aggressor, has ever had to revoke a pledge previously made since it has in fact has never made a concrete promise. For whenever a pact on collective security is concluded, the situation of possible aggression is not envisaged in concrete terms. It therefore remains undefined. Such vagueness entails fatal consequences for any prospective victim of aggression. When he becomes the target of attack, there is no common definition of the situation which has resulted. Any member of the system defines the situation on his own and, on this basis, decides independently which side is the victim of aggression and which one the aggressor and also what kind of support is appropriate. In fact a member can even conclude that there is no aggression at all. But he is equally free to say that the victim of aggression is the aggressor and vice versa – and can then act accordingly.

Under such circumstances, it is justified to say that a system that claims to provide for collective security, actually posits no concrete obligations to support a victim of aggression and, therefore, creates a mere semblance of collective security. International security, however, is too important to allow its being undermined by an empty promise. It is for this reason that the Western countries have chosen to preserve NATO after the Cold War has ended. There is no security substitute to NATO. European security would be put in jeopardy if NATO were replaced by a system of collective security which in fact promises collective insecurity. What is needed is to adapt NATO as the only functioning European security system to changed requirements. That's what the Atlantic allies are striving at. What they seek is to open NATO for those countries that both want to become members and share NATO's basic interests. It is only on this basis that the common purpose can be maintained which will allow common action when peace and security are at stake.

As far as the current situation is concerned, the conflict in Bosnia has given a number of insights. As long as the Europeans have tried to cope with the problems, there was some effort but certainly no result. The reason is that neither the OSCE nor the EU were capable of providing a framework for common action. It was only when NATO took responsibility that the warring parties were eventually induced to discontinue their internecine armed confrontation. The Atlantic Alliance in which both the present and the prospective new members of the share a common understanding of the situation and the resulting requirements, became the focus for the very common action which had proved impossible in any other context. At the same time, Russia has demonstrated both in Bosnia and elsewhere that it has partially divergent interests. This is natural given the country's grossly divergent background. But this fact shows that there are limits to commonality which are likely to preclude consensus on efficient support to victims of aggression. It would jeopardize European security if this difference in security interest were ignored. What is necessary, is to capitalize on those common security interests which do exist and to provide for an agreement to disagree whenever such commonality is lacking. This is precisely the purpose of the NATO-Russia Founding Act and the resulting mechanism of coordinating mutual security efforts. The Founding Act bears evidence to Western willingness to provide for maximum cooperation and consensus between the two sides, partial differences in security interest notwithstanding.

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Belegexemplare erwünscht.
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